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“A Very Crushable, Kissable Girl”: Queer Love and the Invention of the Abnormal Girl Among College Women in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

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Abstract

Young women growing up in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era increasingly found their relationships subject to scrutiny as doctors, parents, teachers, and school administrators began to worry about the so-called abnormal girl. Attempts to suppress the culture of crushes and romantic friendships between young women reflected these larger cultural anxieties about their relationships. But, as notions of normative girlhood began to form, this intense scrutiny of their relationships had a significant impact on their everyday lives. The young women who were navigating this scientific and cultural shift developed a range of innovative strategies from subversively concealing their relationships to boldly pursuing their queer desires.

Keywords: LGBTQ history; queer history; history of gender and sexuality; women’s history; Progressive Era

During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era romantic relationships between women were referred to as crushes, romantic friendships, or Boston marriages. A crush, as it was defined at the time, referred to a woman’s deep adoration for another woman. These were fairly common occurrences among young women. Crushes were typically one-sided, but when they were mutual, they could develop into more long-term romantic friendships—intimate and loving relationships between two women that continued into their adult lives and even after their heterosexual marriages. Romantic friendships shared characteristics of heterosexual romances with exchanges of sentimental letters, the giving of gifts, and verbal or physical expressions of love and adoration. Women who eschewed marriage and chose to commit their future to their romantic friend, moving in together, and sharing their lives, were said to have formed a Boston marriage.¹

Surviving documentary evidence, which by its nature privileges the stories of upper- and middle-class white women, reveals that these intimate relationships were especially common among a subsection of elite educated women for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.² These relationships, however, were also viewed with some

suspicion for fear that they might lead to homosexual activities and/or discourage young women from marrying men.³ Such suspicions were seemingly confirmed through the research of late nineteenth-century sexologists who documented the prevalence of homosexual activities among the general population. By the early twentieth century medical professionals, educators, and parents increasingly believed that crushes among young women were symptoms of abnormal development with the potential to lead to homosexuality. The invention of the so-called abnormal girl fueled a concerted campaign on school campuses to crush the crush.

Scholars have already established the commonality of these relationships among young college women during this era and have noted the emergence of a medical model leading to attempts to suppress these relationships. But few scholars have considered the impact of this paradigm shift on the lives of the individuals involved. The intense regulation of their relationships, especially beginning in the early twentieth century onward, had very real, life-changing implications for young women who found their lives suddenly subject to intense scrutiny. Parents and school officials worried not only that crushes would lead to homosexuality but that public knowledge of lesbianism on college campuses could ruin the reputation of their families and schools. Young women responded to these oppressive efforts to regulate their relationships by developing a range of innovative strategies from subversively concealing their relationships to boldly pursuing their queer desires.

The Ubiquitous College Crush

During the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, crushes were a common part of the school experience. A younger student typically developed a crush on an older student and expressed her admiration by bestowing gifts of flowers, candy, poetry, and general adoration on her crush. The older student could choose to reciprocate the affection by inviting the younger student to college social functions such as luncheons, spreads, and sporting events. All-women dances and other activities sponsored by universities further normalized crushes and romantic friendships.⁴ Sophomores at Smith College, for example, invited a freshman of their choice to the Freshman Frolic. This dance imitated all the courting rituals common among young men and women of the era. The sophomore would send her date flowers, pick her up, buy her dinner, fill out her dance card, get her refreshments, and walk her home. At Vassar, young women playing the so-called man's part at dances dressed in pants and coats. Assuming that both parties were happy at the end of the date, invitations for future dates were expected to follow.⁵

In 1907, the Wellesley student yearbook, the *Wellesley Legenda*, described crushes as fairly common among freshmen defining the term as “an affliction ... a kind of obsession which leads the subject to expend all her substance upon the object” through “little floral tributes” and “little words of love.”⁶ A poem published in the 1909 *College News* at Wellesley further noted the characteristics associated with the “typical college crush”:

A box of flowers and a hidden note,
A loving gaze and embarrassed flush,
This to the Freshman mind at first,
Is a typical college crush – Oh sha!
That typical college crush!⁷

Valentine's Day provided an opportunity for admirers to send sentiments of love to their crush. The author of a poem printed in the 1900 *Vassar Miscellany* described the multiple valentines she had read:

Kate's heart belongs to a Harvard man,
And Jack's is given to Nell,
The Freshman's heart to her Senior friend,
And Helen's heart to Belle.⁸

This poem reveals not only the significance of the Valentine as a means of expressing one's love to a crush, but the conflation of crushes between women with crushes between men and women. Kate's crush on a Harvard man and Jack's love of Nell are seen as equally valid as the freshman's crush on a senior and Helen's love of Belle.

Physical displays of affection including hugging, kissing, and cuddling were also common between mutual crushes. In 1890, a newspaper writer reflecting on the complexities of relationships between women noted that their friendships "always begin like love affairs." The author asked, "Did you ever watch two school girls, between whom has sprung up a bosom friendship? Did you ever see a pair of lovers any spoonier than they? What entwining of arms, what enfolding of waists, what rushing together of lips, what glances of devotion, what pledges of deathless affection." Physical affection thus was accepted as a normal aspect of women's relationships. But more than that, the author noted the depth of these friendships: "Clearly the sweet creatures are in love with each other, and no man whose heart is properly situated and in good working order can blame either of them for it."⁹

Crushes took on significant meaning in the lives of young women. They freely spoke about their feelings in their personal writings. These documents give us valuable insight into the various ways that young women loved each other during this historical era. Christine Ladd kept a diary throughout her young adult years detailing her affection for the various loves in her life. In Ladd's late high school years, she described her correspondence and visits with a "Mr. Sherman" who was courting her. But on January 26, 1865, Ladd confessed to her diary: "I do not like Mr. Sherman fully ... " In the next entry, however, she whole-heartedly declared her love for a girl named Eva Well. She gushed:

I have declared my passion and my mistress loves me! Eva is my love. I slept with her one night. We remained awake many hours confessing our love. Ah! I cannot say how much I love her; better than anyone in the world. She is beautiful. A skin fair as the foam of the sea ... Eyelids that droop and flutter and triumph and then rest lovingly over the witching orbs beneath. She said in her deep earnest voice, I never loved any one as I love you, Kitty. Oh, can I believe it? Is it true that anyone can love me, homely wicked as I am? I have had my lady-loves before, but I have worshipped at a distance, made happy by a smile, intoxicated by a kind word dropped carelessly; but never have I had the exquisite joy of love returned. Now I know what is meant by the ecstasy of a kiss. Ah! Why is it we have no words given us to express the things we feel so deeply?¹⁰

Ladd enrolled in Vassar College in the fall of 1866 despite the objections of her family who insisted that college was unnecessary for women and that she would be too old to marry after graduation. She increasingly used her diary during this period as an outlet for her frustrations, sometimes writing in French to prevent others from reading it. She wrote

about the women who attracted her attention including Carrie Davis who she described as “the mistress of my affections.” She again mentioned Mr. Sherman, who had begun work as a physician in Westfield, and was still courting her. Writing in French, she confessed that she did not love him at all but wrote, “I am already very old, I do not have enough beauty for my charms, and men are rare. What to do?”¹¹ After graduating Vassar in August of 1869, she promised to marry Sherman. But sometime during the next year, the engagement was called off.

A few years later on September 28, 1871, Ladd wrote a detailed and passionate description of a reunion with one of her former “loves” (perhaps Eva Well):

... I believed that I had outgrown my love for her. I had heard that she was coming to town, and I had borne it calmly; but once I saw her, to feel the magnetism of her beauty, was all that was wanted to rivet again my chains. This passion is beyond my control, and it is very real ... She kissed me warmly, drew me to her a little – she is taller than I am – and said she would come and see me. She has not been here, and she has left town. It is like her – she would never come. All night, half waking and half sleeping, my aching arms were out-stretched to find her. I drew the pillow close and tried to think it was her lovely form. All day I waited. At every ringing of the bell my heart jumped into my mouth, but all in vain. She did not come, and she has gone. Was ever fair lady-love so cruel? Is she happy with her husband?¹²

Ladd’s feelings for women ranged from crushes to romantic friendships that clearly included physical affection and sexual desire. These relationships were an important part of her life.¹³

Limited archival evidence suggests that crushes were also common among affluent Black college women during this era. Angelina Weld Grimké was the daughter of a prominent Black activist family in Washington, D.C. While attending high school at the M Street School, she developed a romantic friendship with classmate Mary Burrill. However, Grimké’s father arranged to send her away to school after her aunt and uncle expressed concern over her generally rebellious behavior. When Grimké left to attend the Carleton Academy in Northfield, Minnesota, in 1896, Burrill wrote to say how much she missed her. Recalling their past encounters Burrill wrote, “could I just come to meet thee once more, in the old sweet way, just coming at your calling, and like an angel bending o’er you breathe into your ear ‘I love you.’”¹⁴ Burrill included a quote from a poem she had read that she said reminded her of Grimké:

Farewell! – and never think of me,
 In lighted hall or lady’s bower.
 Farewell! – and never think of me,
 In spring sunshine or summer hours.
 But when you see a lonely grave
 Just where a broken heart may lay
 With not one mourner by its sod
 Then and then only – Think of me!¹⁵

Although the relationship with Burrill ended, Grimké continued to pursue romantic relationships with other young women. During her time at Carleton Academy, Grimké had a crush on a classmate, Mary (Mamie) Edith Karn. Grimké drafted letters to her love on the back of her physics notes:

Oh Mamie if you only knew how my heart beats when I think of you and it yearns and pants to gaze, if only for one second upon your lovely face. If there were any trouble in this wide and wicked world from which I might shield you how gladly would I do it if it were even so great a thing as to lay down my life for you. I know you are too young now to become my wife but I hope, darling, that in a few years you will come to me and be my love, my wife! How my brain whirls how my pulses leap with joy and madness when I think of those two words, 'my wife.'¹⁶

There is no further record of the relationship with Karn.

After the turn of the century, young women continued to openly express their love for each other in their personal writings. Stella Bloch Hanau candidly wrote about her crushes and romantic friendships in her diaries. She mentioned many of the young men that piqued her interest. But she expressed the strongest sentiments for young women. In November 1907, during her freshman year at Barnard College, Hanau wrote that "almost everyone in college" has a crush on Florence Wyeth. After watching her perform in *If I Were King*, Hanau began to show an interest in Wyeth but noted in her diary: "Of course I haven't a cr[ush]. I don't know the girl."¹⁷ Several weeks later, she wrote that she could not stop thinking about Wyeth. She began to dream about her and reflected on these dreams in her diary: "There is a certain irresistible fascination about her. The way she looks, sits, moves, and holds her hands."¹⁸ She imagined herself acting alongside Wyeth who would be playing Petruchio in the school's spring play:

Oh suppose I were great at acting. Oh think of being Kate in the Taming of the Shrew – think of being kissed by Petruchio – Oh Stella you silly – what a fool you are. Do you know you are shaking. Talk about inside wiggles. I have them outside – Well, to bed, to bed – tis late. Fl[orence] if I believed in the power of – I would wish with all my might that you would think of me now, yes even favor me, whom you don't know.¹⁹

Hanau's adoration for Wyeth eventually faded and she soon developed feelings for a friend named Margot. Her scrapbook included a dried flower she had received from Margot after their first "talky-talk." Next to it, Hanau wrote out the lyrics to a song that was popular at Barnard at the time:

Listen Alice, we will tell you,
you who are unversed in college ways,
What this thing is, this affection,
that comes to us in Freshman days.
You so innocent, you so innocent
That you cannot even surmise
What's a crush, what's a crush,
Oh! what's a crush.
When your heart goes pitter-patter
Just to meet Her on the stairs,
When She smiles upon you kindly
Tho to speak you do not dare
When you jealously, when you jealously.
look upon a rival claim
That's a crush, that's a crush,
Yes, that's a crush.²⁰

Hanau's crush on Margot persisted through the summer until she discovered that Margot was engaged. She resisted the urge to write her a sentimental letter. After Margot's wedding, Hanau wrote in her diary: "I'm going to try only to remember what she has been to me. It's pretty tough tho; a person's wedding means so much."²¹

Details about physical intimacy between young women were also revealed in their personal writings. Jennie Gilbert Jerome, a freshman at Mount Holyoke in 1907, wrote a letter home to her mother describing her interest in a sophomore named Rena Burnham. Jerome explained that although her roommate was much less affectionate, Burnham did "not object to petting or being petted."²² The friendship between Burnham and Jerome grew as Burnham confided in Jerome about being dreadfully homesick. Jerome told her grandmother that she tried to be a comfort to Burnham: "I go up and stay in her bed every evening at bed time."²³ Hugging, kissing, and sharing a bed were such socially acceptable means of expressing their feelings for each other at this point in time that Jerome felt quite comfortable sharing these facts in letters to her mother and grandmother and in her conversations with her classmates apparently without fear of being judged as abnormal.

Mary Culver filled her diary with multiple confessions of adorations for her men and women acquaintances. Culver kept a diary describing her crushes from her high school to her college days at Vassar. In August 1914 she declared: "Oh, Ed is so nice! So good-natured, he'd make an ideal husband ... He kissed me good-bye." A month later, she was praising the "divine" Henry, with whom she had five dances with the night before. The next year, Culver mentioned dancing with Maynard, the "sweetest boy in the whole world." She suspected he was "in a romantic mood, judging from some of the remarks he made. We sat under the palms and pretended we were at Palm Beach on our honeymoon and I sat on his lap going home in the auto." Culver more frequently spoke of her crush on Abie, alternately loving him and cursing him when he turned his attentions to other women. Culver scribbled a flower drawing in her diary and wrote, "He loves me, he loves me not. Anyway he hasn't shown up tonight to say good-bye, so I guess it's not. I like him anyway, so there!" Her adoration of Abie faded with time.²⁴

Culver described her crushes for women in similarly affectionate terms. A few days after beginning her freshman year at Vassar, she wrote, "Oh, I adore Agnes Rogers. I just hate myself for being so foolish about her." The next day she explained that she was feeling "blue 'cause I know Agnes doesn't love me." Weeks later she declared that Rogers was "dear as ever" and that she was trying to "overcome her passion." Culver courted Rogers with candy and flowers and when Rogers walked hand in hand with her to chapel, Culver gushed in her diary "Agnes is a love." The next day Culver was ecstatic to report, "This afternoon I went for a ride with dearest Agnes by my side – ah, ye gods! So near! Tonight I danced with her and oh she is divine, she is, she is, she is! I love her madly." By the following month, however, Culver was expressing her adoration for a young woman named Bertha and shortly thereafter for a classmate named Rose. She declared her love for them and hoped they would love her in return. A scribbled note about an anonymous crush in the back of her diary read, "She is divine. She has a disagreeable face but when she smiles she is adorable, and she smiles often. She speaks with a little boy voice and says such cunning things and laughs and then just looks at you – and holds your hand in the dark – a very crushable, kissable girl." Referring to another woman crush in November 1915, Culver wrote: "Oh, if I were a man I could hardly keep my hands off her!"²⁵

The evidence from Culver's diary suggests that young women of this era enjoyed a relative freedom to openly express their affections for both men and women. Yet, Culver

and other women of her generation knew that regardless of their desires, they were expected eventually to enter into a committed monogamous heterosexual marriage. Culver frequently alluded to her future married state with notes like, "I must learn to cook before I get married. I'm going to learn how to do creamed potatoes, and biscuits, and jue, not because I like it but because all men do."²⁶ Several times, she wondered to her diary who her husband might be and whether she would ever find a man who would love her. Despite the assumption that she would ultimately marry a man, Culver's romantic feelings for women suggested the equal importance of love between women in the lives of many young women of this era.

Inventing The Abnormal Girl

Though common, crushes were also viewed with suspicion for their perceived threat to heterosexual marriage. The development of sexological theory in the late nineteenth century, confirming the prevalence of homosexuality, seemed to offer scientific credence to these concerns. The result was the emergence of concerted campaigns to suppress crushes on school campuses.

By the Progressive Era, sexologists, medical doctors, and psychologists had begun to seriously study adolescent development and sexuality. These experts generally argued against the criminalization of homosexuality and highlighted the range of natural sexual variation among humans. British sexologist Havelock Ellis believed that sexual inversion (a term sexologists of this era used for homosexuality) largely resulted from a congenital abnormality. Ellis believed there were two distinct types of women inverts: the first group he defined as (typically more masculine) congenital or active inverts and the second group as (typically more feminine) individuals who acquired inversion as a result of association with or seduction by congenital inverts. Thus, he posited the idea of a sort of situational homosexuality where otherwise "normal" women could be coerced into homosexual behaviors in certain types of environments. Ellis especially blamed schools for fostering homosexuality and suggested coeducation as one solution. In the 1901 edition of his book *Sexual Inversion*, Ellis explicitly linked schoolgirl crushes with homosexuality and cautioned against physical intimacy between young women. Ellis's study thus implied that crushes were problematic since all crushes contained a sexual element even if there was no overt sexual activity.²⁷

Writing in the 1910s, psychiatrist Sigmund Freud deviated from earlier sexologists by proposing a theory that the roots of homosexuality stemmed not from a biological anomaly but from a psychological failure to resolve psychosexual issues in childhood, thus resulting in a sort of arrested development in adolescent years. Freud believed that homosexuality was, to some degree, a normal stage of development that all children passed through on their maturation into heterosexual adulthood. Failure to make a transition to heterosexuality, he believed, was symptomatic of stunted growth and perhaps a result of the pressures of modern life.²⁸ This represented a rejection of congenital theories or earlier mid-nineteenth-century theories that linked sexual inversion with racialized ideas about evolutionary degeneration.²⁹ Freud's theories suggested that homosexuality was not limited primarily to the allegedly less-evolved lower classes. Young women of the middle and upper classes could therefore be susceptible to factors that could lead to arrested psychosexual development. Like Ellis, Freud emphasized the dangers of all-women environments in fostering homosexuality among young women and his research cast further suspicion on crushes. Popular interpretations of Freud's

research combined with Progressive Era beliefs about the effect of environmental factors on human behavior. Psychoanalysis increasingly tended to focus on how young women came to “acquire” homosexuality turning their attention to a young woman’s family and school environment.

Despite their intention of studying the range of human sexuality in an attempt to disassociate homosexuality from its criminal or immoral taint, sexologists had implicitly succeeded in associating homosexuality with abnormality. They disagreed on whether the causes of sexual and gender deviance in women were a sign of degeneracy, a congenital defect, arrested psychological development, or environmental influence. But they generally agreed that the “abnormal girl” who exhibited homosexual feelings or behaviors must be diagnosed and treated. Thus, even as some sexologists attempted to assure a concerned public that fleeting homosexual feelings and behaviors in youth were somewhat normal, they suggested these behaviors were problematic if they continued beyond adolescence. Crushes seemed to be clear indicators of homosexuality. Medical doctors and psychologists generally recommended early intervention by educators and parents to guide the child back on the right track. Whereas young women of color and working-class youth were likely to face criminal punishment and incarceration for sexual transgressions, white middle- and upper-class youth were more likely to receive intervention and medical treatment. Mild cases were met with relatively gentle guidance and redirection from parents or teachers. More extreme cases were treated with psychological counseling or medical procedures.³⁰

Advice Literature

Writers in popular magazines and periodicals both influenced and helped spread the ideas of the sexologists while alerting the public to the possible dangers of certain types of women’s friendships. Underlying anxieties about women’s intimate relationships had existed for quite some time. In an 1894 issue of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Ruth Ashmore noted that the writing of love notes, the giving of flowers and gifts, and kisses between crushes were all signs of a problematic relationship. She explained that if a girl gives away her love too freely to a girl friend, there is little “to be given to Prince Charming when he comes to claim his bride.” Then more directly Ashmore stated, “I like a girl to have many girl friends; I do not like her to have a girl sweetheart . . . she must find in her husband the one person to whom she can tell everything.”³¹ In an 1898 article in the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Ashmore again condemned “overly romantic relationships” between young women. She wrote that there “is something wrong” with a girl who wanted to spend her life with her “chum.”³² Thus these concerns were already mainstream by the early twentieth century, but the dissemination of the sexologists’ findings exacerbated these fears.

Later writers, knowledgeable about the research of the sexologists, more openly expressed their suspicions about the sexual dangers of relationships between women. In her 1911 book, *Almost a Woman*, Dr. Mary Wood-Allen, a physician and member of the social purity movement, condemned crushes and romantic friendships as “morbid friendships” that were “unnatural” and “dangerous, both to health and morals.”³³ In 1913 she wrote in *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* that these relationships led to a “weakening of the moral fiber” that may “degenerate” into even more “deplorable” behaviors:

When girls are so sentimentally fond of each other that they are like silly lovers when together, and weep over each other’s absence in uncontrollable agony, the conditions

are serious enough for the consultation of a physician. It is an abnormal state of affairs, and if probed thoroughly might be found to be a sort of perversion, a sex mania, needing immediate and perhaps severe measures.³⁴

Irving David Steinhardt, a New York physician and instructor at Cornell University Medical School, went even further by openly discussing the potential sexual aspects of women's relationships. In *Ten Sex Talks to Girls* (1914), Steinhardt explicitly told his readers to "avoid girls who are too affectionate ... " or girls who "admire your figure and breast development" or invite you "to remain at their homes all night, and to occupy the same bed they do." He cast a shadow of suspicion over a relatively common practice when he turned his attention to bed sharing. Condemning snuggling he warned, "Avoid the touching of sexual parts, including the breasts, and, in fact, I might say avoid contact of any parts of the body at all ... and let your conversation be of other topics than sexuality." He insisted that beds are for sleeping, "do not lie in each other's arms when awake or falling asleep ... When you go to bed, go to sleep just as quickly as you can. If possible, avoid sleeping with anyone else."³⁵ Steinhardt's description was laden with fears about the potentially destructive effects of women's sexuality and warnings about the need to contain it.

Fears about homosexuality were also explicitly linked with the racist concerns of eugenicists who worried about the survival of the "Anglo-Saxon race." The increasing birthrates of immigrant and non-white populations in the early twentieth century compared with the declining birthrates of the native-born and white population suggested to eugenicists that the white middle and upper-middle classes were slowly committing a form of race suicide. Eugenicists further feared the mingling of the races and encouraged white men and women of the elite classes to procreate and do their part to strengthen the race. They believed that the growing number of educated women, the expansion of women's political rights, and the increase in the unmarried or homosexual women was impeding childbearing and thereby endangering the future of the nation. These beliefs contributed to the growing anxiety over the so-called abnormal relationships between college women.³⁶

With the popular spread of the writings of sexologists and eugenicists, advice writers increasingly recommended intervention to prevent potential moral disasters in the lives of young women. Their writings began to reflect the language of the sexologists by using medical terminology in reference to young women's relationships. A 1903 article in *Good Housekeeping*, for example, described college crushes in this manner:

The symptoms of this disease are often alarming, and the fever may run from one week to four years. The ordinary lovesick girl is easily cured in comparison with one consumed by so all-absorbing a passion as this. I remember one girl so afflicted, who would stand for hours in a pouring rain, waiting to catch one glance from the beloved object as she passed from one building to another.³⁷

The medical influence on the author's choice of words in referring to crushes is clear: those "afflicted" by a college crush revealed "symptoms" of the "disease" that had to be "cured."

Medical professionals began to vocally insist that it was the moral obligation of parents to prevent crushes, and therefore homosexual relationships, from developing.³⁸ Mothers were urged to intervene at the first sign of a crush. Gabrielle E. Jackson writing in the book

The Dawn of Womanhood (1908) recommended, "If the mother discovers her daughter swaying towards the foolish, demoralizing friendship, it is high time for her to provide more wholesome occupation for mind, and more healthful exercise for her body."³⁹ Jackson suggested that early parental interference could protect their daughters from the emotional distress of the inevitable demise of a schoolgirl crush. Mothers apparently took this type of advice seriously and began warning their daughters. Jennie Jerome described her crushes in a letter home but paused to assure her mother that she was "mindful of your advice on 'crushes.'"⁴⁰

Fathers were also expected to take an active role in protecting their daughters from potentially dangerous relationships. Charles F. Thwing, the president of Western Reserve University and Adelbert College in Cleveland, Ohio, wrote an article in 1911 titled "Advice of a Father to a Daughter Entering College." Thwing speaking both as a father and a university administrator expressed the belief that crushes had the potential to harm both young women: "a crush is sometimes taken too seriously ... keep your friendships sane, healthful, healthy, helpful, natural."⁴¹ Thwing, by the example of his article, suggested that it was the duty of fathers to warn their daughters about the ridiculousness of crushes. The author of a 1913 article in *Harper's Bazaar* went even further warning parents about the potential of a crush to "mar if not ruin" their daughter's "whole career, both physically and morally." The writer implored every father and mother to take responsibility for stopping "this increasing social evil."⁴²

Crushing the Crush

As school administrators, parents, and advice columnists began to openly speak of the threat of the abnormal girl, the suggestion that universities fostered homosexual relations seemed to whip critics of women's education into near hysteria. Whereas in 1890 women constituted only 35 percent of university students, by 1920 women made up 47 percent of the college population. This was an elite group of mostly upper- and middle-class white women, however, since only 8 percent of college-aged women were attending college in 1920.⁴³ In what historian George Chauncey has described as the "heterosexual counterrevolution" of the 1910s and 1920s, people grew increasingly hostile toward homosexuality as they sought to buttress heterosexual marriage against a variety of threats, including education for women.⁴⁴ The emergence of the specter of the abnormal girl cast a shadow over women's education and posed a dangerous threat in a society growing ever more fearful of the new educated and politically empowered woman.

School administrators responded to public concerns about these dangers with fervent efforts to eliminate crushes. High school teachers and counselors began to see this as a crucial part of their work in shaping the development of young girls into women. In 1919, Annie Tillet, girls' principal at Durham City High School insisted that one of her most important duties was advising young women on the formation of proper friendships.⁴⁵ Helen Dalton Bragdon, dean for the College of Women at the University of Rochester in the 1920s, offered her advice in *Counseling the College Student*. Bragdon grouped crushes among a list of problems young women might face in college including worry, feelings of inferiority, dancing, drinking, and petting. She defined crushes as "an exaggerated affection and sentiment for a person of the same sex, resulting, not in a give-and-take of understanding, enjoyment, and action, but in reveling in emotion for emotion's sake." Suppressing crushes required a community effort. Students themselves, Bragdon suggested, should work to make "conditions unfavorable for the development of such isolated and pseudo

friendships.” She urged educators to carefully observe students for signs of crushes and delicately approach the subject if such an issue is suspected. She also recommended that administrators offer opportunities for more interaction between men and women on college campuses. This was essential in order to ensure that young women “develop the heterosexual interests which are natural for the age of adolescence.”⁴⁶

Educators hoped that revising school policies would shift college cultural norms. They began to openly discourage crushes and romantic friendships among students by explicitly warning students about the dangers of such relationships. Through regimented schedules, carefully planned social events, and curfews, the daily life of college women was increasingly regulated. Efforts to prevent romantic and sexual liaisons between young women included instituting frequent room rotations and introducing new living arrangements such as single dorm rooms. Large dorms were replaced with smaller family-style homes (the cottage system) that emphasized more of a domestic experience. Students were assigned chores and roles within the home in imitation of the structure of a typical family home. Through this form of social regulation, administrators hoped not only to more closely monitor student behavior but to inculcate domestic values and expectations of heterosexual marriage and domesticity.⁴⁷

Administrators also sought to embed heteronormativity into the institutional structure. Dances and coeducational activities were shifted to focus young women’s attention on developing relationships with young men. In the 1920s, President MacCracken at Vassar College proposed more courses on homemaking and lectures on the “glorification of wifehood and motherhood.” MacCracken also encouraged frequent visitations by eligible young men to the college.⁴⁸ Burges Johnson, a professor at Vassar in 1925 noted the change commenting on the number of men visiting women on campus—a “social freedom ... that did not exist a few many years ago” and would surprise “the old-time graduate.” Johnson understood and articulated the importance of this freedom in suppressing crush culture: “the old complaint that the cloistered college girl leads to an abnormal social existence which unfits her for life after college must be somewhat modified nowadays.”⁴⁹ The privileging of relationships between men and women over relationships between women was intended to eradicate the homosocial culture that permeated college life and prevent the emergence of so-called abnormal relationships.

Schools also revised their marketing strategies in an effort to preserve their reputation from accusations that they fostered homosexuality. They emphasized the role of universities in inculcating young women with the values they would need in order to evolve into ideal feminine heterosexual maturity. They reframed the meaning of women’s education by promoting college as a means of furthering a young woman’s preparation and prospects for marriage. They normalized women’s education by shifting the portrayal of educated women from sexually deviant spinsters to future wives and mothers. Critics of women’s education demanded the hiring of married professors to set an “example of natural living.”⁵⁰ They believed that hiring masculine men and feminine women professors living in normative heterosexual marriages would provide models of proper heteronormative domesticity. Administrators hoped that by implementing clearly defined and rigidly enforced binary gender roles on school campuses, they could eliminate the homosexual threat and save the reputation of their schools.

But, unmarried women professors, some of whom contentedly lived in Boston marriages, continued to teach on college campuses. They responded to these new rules in a variety of ways. One anonymous faculty member who openly admitted to having had several homosexual relationships while she was in college, chose to look the other

way at such relationships among her own students. But she paid the price and was soon in “fearful hot water” with her supervisors for “not utterly damming the relationship.” Thus, social pressure forced her to hypocritically crack down on so-called abnormal relationships. She believed that until teachers faced “the problem honestly” there would “be a continuance of a stupid, cowardly, hypocritical attitude and much unnecessary, harmful suffering by girls who feel that the world would regard them as pariahs, dirty, evil things, although they *know* they are not.”⁵¹ Other teachers, motivated perhaps by feelings of defensiveness about their own Boston marriages, made clear distinctions between their relationships and abnormal relationships. They also insisted that they were nothing like the pathologically disordered mannish, man-hating sexual deviants described in the sexologists’ writings and in popular discourse. Jeannette Marks, a professor at Mount Holyoke College, for example, defensively sought to distinguish her long-term committed relationship with college president Mary Woolley from the so-called unhealthy infatuations between women described by sexologists.⁵² In her 1913 book, *A Girl’s Student Days and After*, Marks warned young women to avoid crushes noting, “There is no denying that there is great temptation to violent admirations and attractions in school.” Marks acknowledged the intensity of emotions associated with these types of friendships but insisted that such relationships “should be relinquished immediately, even at the cost of much heartache. The heartache will be only temporary; the bad influence might become permanent.”⁵³ Instead Marks lauded the benefits of slow-developing friendships based on common mutual interests. Marks then appears to be defending the type of relationship that she shared with her life partner. Their own queer experiences therefore shaped some educators’ responses to concerns about the rampant crush culture that remained prevalent among their students.⁵⁴

Young Women’s Personal Experiences

Despite the best-laid plans of administrators and the social pressures of the anti-crush culture, young women’s experiences rarely neatly aligned to expectations. Students frequently rebelled against every institutional rule no matter how small. They broke curfews, personalized their living spaces, ate forbidden food, and organized unsanctioned communal celebrations. These expressions of individual agency reflected at least a temporary rejection of societal expectations of proper feminine behavior. Some of these transgressions were tolerated to a limited degree by forgiving faculty and administrators who chose to look the other way.⁵⁵ The new regulation of women’s relationships and the imposition of heterosexual expectations proved especially oppressive. Young women experienced this hyper-vigilant culture in a variety of ways. Some gave up their crushes, conformed to heteronormative expectations, and helped shape new social norms about women’s friendships as they denounced crush culture. Some dared to continue to openly talk about their crushes on other young women with little regard for the teasing of their peers or warnings of sexologists and educators. Others chose to be more covert, pursuing queer romantic and sexual relationships in secret, hiding their actions from administrators and peers. A few embraced their sexual identity and outright rejected a heterosexual future.

New policies designed to eliminate crush culture put pressure on students to suppress their queer desires and conform to heterosexual norms. The impact on students is clear in college newspapers. Editorials in the *Vassar Miscellany* and the *Barnard Bulletin* in the 1900s and 1910s began to denounce the persistence of the crush phenomenon on campus

referring to crushes as absurd, ridiculous, and disgusting. The writers seemed especially concerned that their so-called normal friendships would be mislabeled as crushes subjecting them to unwarranted name-calling and ridicule. This discussion reveals just how unforgiving school culture was becoming toward crushes.⁵⁶ Stella Block Hanau mentioned in her 1908 diary that her friend Margot had not been accepted into a social club in part “because she has a crush on Florence.”⁵⁷ Although crushes were still common, students were beginning to perceive them as a sign of immaturity.

By the 1920s, the concern about crushes had clearly permeated the entire university culture. Margaret Ream’s 1924 letter to Katharine Yoder Hook is fraught with tension reflecting the anxieties of the era about the perils of young women’s friendships. Margaret (“Meg”) had recently graduated from Mount Holyoke where she had met Katharine (“Hookie”) who was an underclassman. In the letter, written a few months after commencement Meg seems to be gently deflecting Hookie’s expressions of adoration and love. Meg admits to strong feelings for “Hookie” telling her that she is “one of the most irresistible and appealing girls I’ve ever known.” But she explains to Hookie that she had purposely tried to keep her distance because “The college talks you know about upper classmen and under classmen being together ... I was afraid to be with you a lot for fear your feeling for me would develop into one of those ‘crushes.’ In such a case there is no happiness for either person ...” Meg advises her to be careful as a junior because “Freshmen will adore you, Hookie, but just be Hello-friends with them ...” and “don’t let anyone label any contact you may make in college as a “crush,” because it will make you appear different in the eyes of a good many of the worth-while people.”⁵⁸ The letters reveal the pressure that young women faced during this period to police each other’s relationships and to suppress their queer desires. Meg advises Hookie to conform by avoiding crushes rather than risk appearing “different.” By 1925, student publications encouraged Vassar students to seek guidance from school deans and psychiatrists about “disturbing environmental conditions” such as crushes.⁵⁹

Some young women who were concerned about public perception chose to keep their relationships secret in light of this growing stigma around crushes. Racism combined with homophobia provided even more reasons that young women of color may have hid their queer relationships. Angelina Weld Grimké fell in love with both men and women throughout her life. These romances inspired her writing and literary career. She wrote poems about her queer desire. An example of one such poem is “Caprichosa” written in 1901:

Little lady coyly shy
With deep shadows in each eye
Cast by lashes soft and long,
Tender lips just bowed for song,
And I oft have dreamed the bliss
Of the nectar in one kiss ...⁶⁰

But Grimké chose to keep these most intimate expressions of her desire for women obscured or unpublished even in her later life. Evolutionary theories and racial hierarchies rooted in scientific racism, alleged biological anomalies in both non-heterosexual and non-white women that supposedly led to sexually deviant behaviors. Queer Black women were thus especially subject to scrutiny.⁶¹ Affluent Black families in this era attempted to combat racist stereotypes of Black immorality by maintaining a public image of respectability. Grimké’s family’s efforts to discourage her queer relationships were therefore

linked to this larger system of racism and homophobia. It is no surprise then that Grimké later chose not to publish the queer poems she had written in her youth, especially as her work became more popular in the 1920s and 1930s when societal attitudes had clearly shifted against crushes between women.⁶²

Larger social anxieties about the alleged dangers of homosexuality influenced young women's perceptions of their romantic and sexual relationships. In the 1920s, Katharine Bement Davis, the director of the Bureau of Social Hygiene, conducted a scientific study of women's sexual behavior that revealed intimate details about the emotional and sexual relationships of young college women.⁶³ Through an anonymous survey, Davis found that over 50 percent of the women reported having had intense emotional relations (essentially crushes or romantic friendships) with other women and in 26 percent of these cases the feelings were accompanied by overt sexual practices. Although their beliefs about the normality of these relationships varied extensively, with 34 percent of respondents recognizing homosexuality as normal and natural, the conclusion of 58 percent of those surveyed was one of disapproval or shame. The effects of social attitudes about homosexuality clearly influenced their responses. Davis noted that of the 293 respondents who confessed to engaging in sexual activity with other young women, 36 percent discontinued the relationship because they came to believe it was "abnormal, wrong or disgusting." But it is perhaps more surprising that over 46 percent of them indicated that they believed their homosexual relationships had been helpful or stimulating to their health. Davis concluded that their negative depiction of homosexuality as abnormal therefore was most likely a reflection of negative public opinion toward the issue.⁶⁴

This stigma helps explain why young women increasingly felt compelled to keep their relationships, and especially the sexual aspects of their relationships, secret. Though not all felt shame about these relationships. One woman who responded to Davis's survey described how she fell in love with another young woman in college. They began a romantic and sexual relationship that continued beyond their college years. She told Davis that because of her love for this woman, she refused to ever marry a man: "I would not give it up for anything ... I am not ashamed of this one relationship because I admire, love, and am loyally attached to this woman, as much as I could be to a husband."⁶⁵ She expressed no regrets about their homosexual love for each other.

Other young women ignored the warning of parents and school officials and dared to openly pursue their queer relationships. As a student at Mount Holyoke in the early 1920s, Margaret Chapin documented her romantic feelings for women, still using the term crushes to describe these relationships, in her letters home. One mutual crush in her sophomore year left her feeling emotionally conflicted. She sought the advice of her mother. Chapin explained that she very much liked Doris Arnold but was worried about how to physically express her affection. She told her mother that after crawling in bed with Doris one night and putting her arms around her, Doris soon "grew very passionate and said she had never told anyone she loved her before—she hated to admit it, but she had to ... I could see that underneath her usual don't care manner her heart had been starving for affection." Much to Chapin's surprise, Doris said, "Oh, it nearly kills me to admit it, but I love you!" Chapin's conflict was in how to best love Doris given that she had apparently never loved or been loved by anyone else before. Although hesitant somewhat in sharing this incident with her mother, Chapin explained that "This is one of the most beautiful and terrible things I have ever had happen to me, and I had to tell someone." Chapin also sought advice from her friends: "Connie knows Doris much better than I do, and she says the combination seems to be a good one. She doesn't think I have harmed Doris by allowing her to show her affection unrestrainedly for once."⁶⁶ The next day she wrote her

mother that she had taken Connie's advice and agreed to let Doris be as affectionate and demonstrative toward her as she desired.⁶⁷

Chapin's mother expressed disapproval of her daughter's relationship with Doris Arnold and suggested that something was wrong with both Doris and Connie. Chapin responded defensively to her mother's claim, "Perhaps Doris and Connie are both abnormal; but then we're all individuals." Doris's parents also had apparently expressed reservations about the relationship. Doris however, chose to laugh off her parent's concerns assuring Chapin "she doesn't care what anyone—not even her own family—thinks, so long as I want to ..." Chapin followed suit and told her mother, "I know you don't approve, but I simply have to do as I am doing. I will be careful not to let my work or my health suffer."⁶⁸ This however did not assuage her mother who continued to object. A few weeks later Chapin wrote to her mother, "Doris is fearfully anxious that you should approve of her—she is so afraid that she will be thought unfit or dangerous as a companion for my youth."⁶⁹ A few days later she wrote to her mother, "Please pray for me that I may have the wisdom to control our affection in the way 'that is best' for us ..." ⁷⁰ Chapin's mother tried to dissuade Chapin from becoming too attached to Arnold and her use of the term "abnormal" suggests the growing influence of beliefs about the dangers of homosexuality. Chapin ignored these warnings and pursued the relationship anyway.

Some openly embraced their homosexual identity. A young woman from Buffalo, New York, wrote to Mary Ware Dennett in September 1924 expressing anxiety over her physical and romantic relationship with another woman. Dennett had written a book, *The Sex Side of Life* (1918), which sought to normalize discussions about sex and masturbation describing these as normal and pleasurable aspects of life.⁷¹ The young woman who wrote Dennett was a recent college graduate who lived with her woman friend and confided to Dennett "that neither of us cares for men" but regard each other as lovers. She explained that when they slept in the same bed together they "sometimes embrace" and that this "of course, arouses pleasurable sensations." She asked Dennett "how far may an affair of this sort be carried without danger?"⁷² Dennett wrote back assuaging her fears and assuring her that homosexual relationships were common and recommended that she read Edward Carpenter's book, *Love's Coming of Age*. Carpenter wrote positively about men and women who loved their own sex. He normalized the "intermediate sex" or "homogenic" individuals writing that:

Formerly it was assumed, as a matter of course, that the type was merely a result of disease and degeneration; but now with the examination of the actual facts it appears that, on the contrary, many are fine, healthy specimens of their sex, muscular and well-developed in body, of powerful brain, high standard of conduct, and with nothing abnormal or morbid of any kind observable in their physical structure or constitution.⁷³

Carpenter's descriptions of homosexual individuals countered negative depictions of the abnormal girl. After reading Carpenter, the young woman wrote back to Dennett about how relieved she was to know there was such a thing as an intermediate sex: "it helps to classify oneself—it has helped me." She noted that she had always regarded homosexual relationships as harmless but was "surprised to learn that they may be actually beneficial. Also, the similar statement concerning masturbation, I had always been told, and have always read, that masturbation is a devastating habit." She acknowledged Dennett's advice about the primacy of heterosexual marriage and commented that she had "no mind-set against marriage at present should the man come into my life" but insisted that

“men at present have no appeal whatsoever. The company of girls is so much more interesting! The mere company of men bores me.” She told Dennett that their relationship continued to “enrich and fulfill and complete life for us. Life seems so sweet when we have each other.” She also noted that the physicality between them had continued but they now felt “fearless, shameless, and wholesome” about their relationship. Thanks to Dennett’s letter, the writer noted, that they now felt comforted and assured.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Beginning in the Progressive Era, the increasingly foreboding specter of the abnormal girl morphed into what historian Sherrie Inness described as the “lesbian menace.”⁷⁵ Universities began to institute policies specifically to discourage the development of close relationships between young women as they launched campaigns to crush the crush. Administrators, faculty, parents, and peers more actively policed relationships between young women.⁷⁶ The success of this campaign is revealed in part by the changing meaning of the word “crush.” Prior to 1920, the term was mostly used to refer to relationships between young women but after 1930 it was only used to refer to relationships between young men and young women. At the same time, a new nomenclature developed that labeled love between women as “abnormal.”

Beliefs about the potential nefarious nature of young women’s friendships had serious implications for queer women. Although in the nineteenth century, crushes, romantic friendships and Boston marriages were viewed with suspicion, they still existed in the open. By the 1920s however, these types of relationships between women came to be associated with abnormality and homosexuality. Young women felt compelled to conceal their relationships with other women as heterosexual couplings became the only acceptable public option. Young women who expressed a desire for anything other than heterosexual marriage came under intense pressure to conform. Still, some women resisted, choosing to pursue their desires regardless of public scrutiny. Queer women found each other and embraced their queer identities. Women continued to love women, even if they had to do so in secret.

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Notes

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2 Although historians have uncovered lots of evidence of such relationships among middle-class white women of this era, these types of intimate friendships were not limited to a specific race, class, or gender.

For more on this, see, for example Karen Hansen, “‘No Kisses Is Like Youres’: An Erotic Friendship between Two African-American Women during the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Gender & History* 7 (Aug. 1995): 153–82; Farah Jasmine Griffin, ed., *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends: Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of Hartford, Connecticut, 1854–1868* (New York: Knopf, 1999); Erica R. Armstrong, “A Mental and Moral Feast: Reading, Writing, and Sentimentality in Black Philadelphia,” *Journal of Women’s History* 16 (Spring 2004): 78–102; Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); E. Anthony Rotundo, “Romantic Friendship: Male Intimacy and Middle-Class Youth in the Northern United States, 1800–1900,” *Journal of Social History* 23 (Autumn 1989): 1–25; Steven Seidman, *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830–1980* (New York: Routledge, 1993); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 75–91; Jonathan Ned Katz, *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006); David Doyle, Jr., “Nineteenth-Century Male Love Stories and Sex Stories,” in *Understanding and Teaching U.S. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History*, 132–42.

3 Scholars have extensively debated whether or not romantic relationships between women during this early era included sexual activity. Scholarly discussions have also emerged about whether crushes, romantic friendships, and Boston marriages were accepted or perceived as sexual, and therefore dangerous, by contemporaries. I think it is now clear based on the diligent research and findings of previous scholars that these relationships existed on a spectrum that ranged from purely romantic relationships to purely sexual relationships with many including varying degrees of romantic and sexual elements. Based on the most current research, it also seems clear that intimate friendships between women were viewed with suspicion and subject to some degree of scrutiny and policing even before psychologists, physicians, and educators invented the concept of the “abnormal girl.” For much more on these debates, see Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual”; Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*; Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*; Inness, *Intimate Communities*; Newman, “The Freshman Malady”; Anna Clark, “Twilight Moments,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14 (Jan.–Apr. 2005): 139–60; Marylynne Diggs, “Romantic Friends or a ‘Different Race of Creatures’?: The Representation of Lesbian Pathology in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Feminist Studies* 18 (Autumn 1992): 317–40; Lisa Moore, “Something More Tender Still Than Friendship’: Romantic Friendship in Early Nineteenth-Century England,” *Feminist Studies* 18 (Autumn 1992): 499–520; Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Martha Vicinus, “The History of Lesbian History,” *Feminist Studies* 38 (Fall 2012): 566–96.

4 Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual,” 1–29; Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 19–20; Inness, *Intimate Communities*, 47; Newman, “The Freshman Malady,” 279–301.

5 Lavinia Hart, “A Girl’s College Life,” *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, June 1901, 188–95.

6 “Of Systems of Economy and Prodigality,” *The Wellesley Legend* (1907): 137–38.

7 “Parliament of Fools,” *College News* (Wellesley, MA) Nov. 10, 1909, 6.

8 “An Unorthodox Valentine,” *Vassar Miscellany*, Feb. 1900, 311.

9 “Our Kaleidoscope: Girls’ Friendships,” *Burlington Free Press*, Mar. 22, 1890, 4.

10 Christine Ladd-Franklin Diary, 1860–1866, Christine Ladd-Franklin Papers, Vassar College Digital Library.

11 Ladd-Franklin Diary, 1860–1866

12 Christine Ladd-Franklin Diary, 1866–1873, Christine Ladd-Franklin Papers, Vassar College Digital Library.

13 Ladd eventually gave up teaching and fought against the objections to women’s higher education in her quest to attend graduate school at Johns Hopkins University. She completed all the requirements for a PhD in mathematics and logic but was denied the degree because she was a woman. Nevertheless, Ladd-Franklin became a prominent American mathematician and psychologist. In 1884, she married Fabian Franklin, with whom she had two children.

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- 68 Letter from Margaret Chapin to her mother Sarah W. Chapin, Feb. 7, 1923, Chapin Papers.
- 69 Letter from Margaret Chapin to her mother Sarah W. Chapin, Feb. 18, 1923, Chapin Papers.
- 70 Letter from Margaret Chapin to her mother Sarah W. Chapin, Feb. 22, 1923, Chapin Papers.
- 71 Mary Ware Dennett, *The Sex Side of Life: An Explanation for Young People* (New York: n. p., 1918).

72 Letter from unknown woman in Buffalo, New York, Sept. 24, 1924, folder 467, Mary Ware Dennett Papers, Radcliffe Institute, Schlesinger Library.

73 Edward Carpenter, *Love's Coming of Age* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd., 1906), 120.

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75 Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*.

76 Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*, 42; Inness, *Intimate Communities*, 66.

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